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SUBJECT: TRINIDAD'S OPPOSITION PARTY CHANGES GUARD

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Trinidad and Tobago's (TT) leading opposition party dramatically changed leadership January 24 when United National Congress (UNC) members overwhelmingly elected Kamla Persad-Bissessar as political leader, making her the first woman to head a major political party in the country's history. The election marked a significant blow to UNC founder and former Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, whose ongoing legal battles may have contributed to his stunning loss by a 10-to-1 margin. Panday supporters are crying foul over claimed irregularities in the internal party elections as speculation turns to whether Persad-Bissessar -- now reaching out to the smaller COP party to widen her base -- will gather enough support among opposition parliamentarians to give the country's president cause to replace Panday as parliamentary opposition leader. Some observers also speculate that Prime Minister Manning's ruling PNM party will call snap elections this year, but our sources (and we agree) judge this unlikely. Manning will, however, shortly undertake a minor cabinet reshuffling. End Summary.

CHANGING OF THE OPPOSITION GUARD

¶2. (U) After a rigorous and very public campaign to win the hearts and minds of the party faithful, parliamentarian Kamla Persad-Bissessar won the United National Congress party elections January 24 to take the helm as political leader, and businessman and longtime politico Jack Warner was elected party chair. Persad-Bissessar's election makes her the first woman to lead a major political party in Trinidad and Tobago.

BUT WILL THE OLD GUARD STEP ASIDE?

¶3. (U) UNC founder and sitting parliamentary Opposition Leader Basdeo Panday lost by a landslide 10-to-1 margin, but his supporters are challenging the results claiming that thousands of ballots went uncounted. Panday himself said he would leave it to others to mount a legal challenge to the election results, but it is widely reported that he has no intention of stepping down quietly as opposition leader in the parliament, a position that is appointed by the president upon a request of a majority of opposition MPs.

¶4. (SBU) It was Panday's refusal to step aside as opposition leader under somewhat similar circumstances in 2006 that led Winston Dookeran to split from the UNC to form a new political

party, the Congress of the People (COP). Persad-Bissessar is said to be reaching out to the COP to form a coalition that could effectively reunite UNC-COP members and strengthen the opposition. A well-placed COP leader told us that he and others favor unity, but that Dookeran might be an obstacle. Several opposition leaders and members of parliament we spoke with said the new UNC political leader should be able to garner the eight votes she needs among opposition party members of parliament in order to call for the appointment of a new opposition leader by the president in the coming days, though Panday is furiously working against this.

MANNING'S REACTIONS

15. (SBU) Meanwhile, commentators have speculated that Prime Minister Patrick Manning's ruling People's National Movement (PNM) party will call a snap elections later this year, although party sources told us such a move would be unlikely (we agree). Local elections, though, which have been delayed for nearly four years, might take place in May in a bid to hold them before the opposition has time to fully reorganize. In addition, Manning is said to be planning a minor cabinet shuffle this week to better position stronger MPs in his government; a cabinet member told us last October that the PM would do so in January because it roughly marks the mid-point of Manning's five-year term.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: The UNC leadership change is widely regarded as a sea change for the party founded by Panday in 1989, and also as a repudiation of what some have characterized as a cantankerous leadership style and the ongoing criminal case involving a London bank account he allegedly failed to declare to the public integrity commission. It also reflects the view among many -- including those who respect Panday and consider him a figure of historic importance -- that the only way to challenge the PNM is for opposition forces to unite, something widely viewed as impossible as long as Panday remained in charge of the UNC. UNC and COP officials tell us they are confident that Persad-Bissessar's charisma and Warner's business sense (and deep pockets) will revitalize those opposed to the PNM, especially if Panday can be moved aside as official opposition leader in the parliament. Persad-Bissessar has made clear she has already set her sights on Manning and the PNM for the parliamentary elections that must be held by late 2012.
Kusnitz